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## 1. Introduction

In March 2008, a few months after Cristina Kirchner took presidential office in Argentina, the four largest farmers' unions halted the commercialisation of grain against the decision to raise export taxes on soybean and sunflower.<sup>1</sup> In November 8 2012 thousands took on the streets of Buenos Aires and other cities of Argentina to protest against 'restrictions to buy US dollars', 'corruption' and 'Cristina's re-election'.<sup>2</sup> Equally, in Brazil, on July 29 2007, there was a march in memory of the victims of Brazil's largest air crash that killed 199 people. Mourning and struggle (*luta e luto*) mingled in clothing and marchers held posters reading 'respect', 'tired', 'enough' and 'Out Lula'.<sup>3</sup> In early June 2013 the Free Pass Movement (*Movimento Passe Livre*) staged a demonstration in São Paulo against a price hike on buses. The following days saw the rising of the biggest protest wave since the student mobilisation that led to the impeachment of President Collor de Mello in 1992. The grievances included improvements in Brazil's deficient public transport network, better healthcare and reform of a corrupted and dysfunctional political system.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, the demands and organisational composition of the newest type of mobilisations seem different from the ones that dominated the social protest of Argentina and Brazil during the 1990s. First, unlike in the 1990s, there is a lack of any reference to anti-neoliberalism and, second, it is evident the attempt to avoid a specific forms of identification besides the nation. However, more fundamentally, this 'newest' type of social protests have also tended to subordinate other protest action that has also taken place over the past years in Latin America. This includes the mobilisation of environmentalists against water-intensive mining projects, indigenous communities fighting for their rights and trade unions striking for better working conditions.

How can the emergence of the latest wave of protest be explained? And also, what is the political meaning of this social mobilisation? In this paper, an important distinction is made between the post-neoliberal and the anti-neoliberal type of protest and there is an in-depth examination of the relationship between them. It is argued that:

- There has been an exhaustion of anti-neoliberalism as the hegemonic constituent imaginary that articulated the strategy of a heterogeneous group of agents
- The liberal imaginary is being performed in the public space, and as such, it posits a critical limit to the advancement of the post-neoliberal consensus, precariously established in the region at the turn of the century.
- The implication of this is the reactivation of a substantial political struggle staged over name 'the people', the subject upon which the legitimation for a specific form of governance is built.

The argument is presented as follows. First, the broader theoretical approach is introduced. Second, the concepts of demand and social imaginary are explained. Third, the case selection is justified and the analytical rationale explained. Forth, the organisational dimension is explored, followed by the study of the rhetoric dimension in the following and final section. In the concluding remarks we examine the current struggle over the name of the people, that is, the shifts described in the organisations and imaginaries staged at the newest type of social protest in relation to the construction of a counter-narrative that undermines the bases of legitimation Post-neoliberal governance.

## **2. Why constructing 'a people' is the main task of politics**

The Essex School belongs to a bundle of theoretical and analytical approaches that have highlighted the importance of 'discourse' within socio-political research.<sup>5</sup> In his book *Discourse* Howarth<sup>6</sup> explains that the growing prominence of discourse analysis is the result of the increasing dissatisfaction with mainstream positivists approaches and the consequent rise of new perspectives including hermeneutics, critical theory and post-structuralism. However, he also points out that the use of the notion of discourse varies significantly depending on the function it plays in a specific theoretical grammar.<sup>7</sup> For a New Social Movement theorist like McAdam, for example, the concept of discourse adopts an instrumental function: 'the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and themselves that legitimate and motivates collective action'.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, a materialist account of discourse focuses on the class structure which

makes discourses possible. Discourse is associated with ideology. The function of discourse analysis for Althusser, for example, was 'to expose the mechanisms by which deception operates and of proposing emancipatory alternatives'.<sup>9</sup> Departing from the Marxist notion of *false consciousness* authors such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, suggest a more comprehensive concept of discourse. In brief, the post-structural turn regards social structures as inherently ambiguous, incomplete and contingent systems of meaning.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the function of discourse analysis aims to examine the mechanisms through which discourses constitute symbolic systems and social orders, their historical and political construction and functioning.

The post-Marxist take on discourse is of particular value for the study of social protest in the context of Latin America which, over the past decades, have acquired relatively stable institutional political systems and developing economies. The dominant understanding of democracy developed in the region has been worked under the lenses of the modernisation theory. In brief, the argument has been that economic modernisation erodes traditional social and political institutions, that is, particularist relations based on patrimonialism, clientelism and corruption. Once triumphant, economic modernisation would bring about the culture and institutions of modern Western liberal democracy, based on an autonomous state capable of enforcing the universal rule of law, representative political institutions, a strong civil society and a political culture of rights and accountability.<sup>11</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell first questioned the assumptions of the modernisation theory<sup>12</sup> but later supported them when developed the influential concept of 'delegative democracies'.<sup>13</sup> In this article O'Donnell argues that the delegation model is based on the fact that 'whoever wins the elections for presidency is entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office'.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis of O'Donnell's model on formal political institutions provided limited tools to capture the effects of non-clientelistic collective mobilisation occurring outside political parties on democracy. Rather, alternative forms of contentious collective action were perceived as a consequence of unaccountable and dysfunctional institutional structure. Following different theoretical traditions, this deficit has been addressed by recent research whose common thread has been to rethink the existing connections between social movements and

political representation in general and in the context of the post-transition in Latin America in particular.<sup>15</sup> The outcome has been to expand the notion of the political beyond restricted conceptions of democracy and political institutions, articulating the notion of discourse to understanding the structuration of socio-political spaces. Central to the operation of bridging the relationship between discourse and democracy has been the notion of political identity.<sup>16</sup>

In the article *Democracy and the Question of Power* Laclau<sup>17</sup> develops an analytically powerful conception of democracy: ‘we could, in some respect present the ensemble of democratic tradition as dominated by an essential ambiguity: on the one hand, democracy has been the attempt to organize the political space around the universality of the community, without hierarchies and distinctions...On the other hand, democracy has also been conceived as the expansion of the logic of equality to increasingly wider spheres of social relations...It goes without saying that the unilateralization of either of these tendencies leads to a perversion of democracy as a political regime’.<sup>18</sup> This apparent contradiction between the whole and the part, or the universal and the particular, lies at the heart of the democratic dynamic according to the author. It is what makes it, ultimately, possible. It is the anti-foundationalism present in this definition that makes clear the difference between Laclau’s and O’Donnell’s definitions of democracy. The socio-political world is formed by *hegemonic* power relations rather than structural relations of domination. There is no closure of the social whole as proposed by the modernisation theory. But there is a more important difference in relation to how to think the *demos*, the subject of democracy. Whereas O’Donnell tends to stress the notion of individual citizenship and institutional accountability, Laclau stresses the notion of collective political identities and power relations; the result of a particularity assuming the representation of an (impossible) universality entirely incommensurable with it, or what he and Mouffe defined as hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

Following this perspective, there is a productive relationship between democracy, on the one hand, and the formation of something like ‘the people’, on the other. The task for the study of democratisation from a post-structural discourse analysis perspective is to unravel the social relations

and practices establishing the hegemonic notion of ‘the people’ whose identity is characterised by the formation of unstable boundaries defining ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of a community.<sup>20</sup> A considerable amount of confusion seems to arise from the inherent ambiguity of signifiers like ‘the people’ and this has been subject of a lot of attention recently both in Latin America and Europe.<sup>21</sup> The renewed interest on populism can be put down to the critique of structuralism in social sciences and the subsequent loss of one key assumption of this philosophical tradition: the privileged ontological position occupied by a particular social group, most notably, the working class. Without the existence of an ontologically privileged political agent all that remains is discourse. But the renewed interest on populism resides also on the necessity to incorporate into the theory of democracy a new grasp of the relationship between the social and the political, different from the stagnant separation dividing what is considered civil and what political.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the old idealisation or demonization of populism, recent studies have tried to ‘operationalise’ populism in order to conduct empirical research and have demonstrated the existence of both ‘inclusionary’ and ‘exclusionary’ types of populisms, the former prevalent in Latin America whilst the latter in Europe.<sup>23</sup> What is interesting in the cited work is the departure from any attempt to study populism from the actual content identifiable as ‘populist’ but, instead, the logic of articulation of those contents. This formal approach to populism and populist discourse is key to prevent normative bias and equally forces the interpretation of context-based socio-political processes. To be sure, in the tradition of Laclau and Mouffe, populism from a discursive analysis refers to the scientific practice of capturing the mechanisms that, within an always unstable and antagonistic environment, attempt to partially fix the identity of subjects and objects through discursive articulation. But, which are the key conceptual elements that can help us examine the slowdown in the *efficacy* of the existing (inclusive) populist formation in Argentina and Brazil? In addition, how do these less abstract concepts relate to the theoretical schema summarised above, i.e., the positioning of discourse, democracy and populism in the reasoning of this paper? The following section answers these two questions.

### **3. Demand and Social Imaginary**

Demand and political imaginary are the two conceptual devices, emerging from the discursive perspective, and applied in this paper to examine two overlapping levels of representation at play in the enactment of what we call the newest type of social protest in Brazil and Argentina. The first level of representation refers to the process through which grievances are expressed, demands are formed, shaped, accepted or rejected. That is, the construction of reality is always mediated by discourse.<sup>24</sup> The second level of representation refers to political representation in a more conventional way, that is, the drivers of a specific political identity which gives voice to popular demands and, as a consequence, influence the process of decision making. For example, *kirchnerismo* in Argentina.<sup>25</sup> In order to capture these two levels of representation we will engage with concepts of demand and social imaginary. The objective of this is twofold. First, the concept of social imaginary contains the sociological attributes necessary to examine the formation of a particular social group, which captures the dynamic of society.<sup>26</sup> It is of particular interest for the argument of this paper which objective is to examine the emergence of a dislocatory element in the post-neoliberal hegemonic political formation in Latin America or, put differently, the increasing loss of efficacy of anti-neoliberalism to sustain the articulation of the existing inclusive populist formation. Second, the concept of demand incorporates the dimension of power that makes a social formation politically meaningful. In sum, the concept social imaginary provides ‘the horizontal’ dimension while demand grasps the ‘vertical’, two constitutive and interdependent moments of political action.<sup>27</sup> While demands express the first level of appearance of a group in the form of a particular grievance, imaginaries aggregate them into collective ‘horizons’.<sup>28</sup>

The concept of social imaginary was first used by Benedict Anderson<sup>29</sup> to study the constellations of cultural and historical *imaginings* behind the emergence of ‘nations’ and its profound and lasting emotional legitimacy. Later, Charles Taylor<sup>30</sup> reapplied the concept in order to explain how what was originally an ‘idea’ in the mind of some influential thinkers became the common sense, the background knowledge, or dominant social imaginary, of Western modernity (the market economy, the public sphere, the self-governing people, etc.). In other words, a moral order (existing among others) becomes a social imaginary of large strata and eventually whole society when this moral order

becomes *the* unchallenged moral order. The latter contributes to explain the real suppression of pluralism taking place in the transition from a world with multiple modernities to the so-called ‘global’ (and singular) Western modernity. In his own words:

‘By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlay these expectations’.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the production of social imaginary for Taylor is not the result of processes of alienation but instead the result of meaningful social interaction carried out by subjects with a high degree of consciousness. In relation to discourse theory, social imaginary puts the emphasis on representations emerging from the level of *practice*, the meanings and relations of power underlying actions of everyday life.<sup>32</sup> This understanding concurs with Laclau’s who defines imaginary as ‘a horizon’ or ‘absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility’.<sup>33</sup> In relation to the argument of this paper, the notion of *anti-neoliberalism* arguably instituted the dominant political imaginary of ‘a move to the left’ in Argentina and Brazil.<sup>34</sup>

‘Unlike the previous decade the anti-neoliberal formation represented a discourse literally named *in opposition to* instead of *in favour of* something. Neoliberalism conveyed many different things. However, as social imaginary, neoliberalism suggested the development of radical free market policies largely blamed to be the responsible of gross inequality, record-high levels of unemployment and the tear of the social fabric. The configuration of the “anti-neoliberalism” formation resulted in the division of the political realm into two opposing camps, namely friends of anti-neoliberalism and enemies of neoliberal reforms’.<sup>35</sup>



And it is the *efficacy* of anti-neoliberalism as main discourse to legitimise the current hegemonic formation what the newest wave of social protest reveals in a complex manner. However, prior to the emergence of new imaginaries, a variety of social demands need to have surfaced and subsequently neutralised by the established order. But, what exactly are demands?

The concept of demands has been a central part of the Systems Theory in political science for a long time. For David Easton<sup>36</sup>, demands play a functional role in the generation of ‘inputs’ towards the political system. In turn, inputs lead to decisions or ‘outputs’ directed to the external social environment which, if it changes, it produces ‘outcomes’. Outcomes subsequently may generate new demands which feedback again the political system and this generates a never-ending cycle whose most salient feature is to guarantee the stability of the system. Laclau and Mouffe<sup>37</sup>, share with Easton the preoccupation to elaborate the conceptual implications of demands onto the political system. However, demands represent a source of destabilization of a specific political formation rather than a source of systemic stability. From both perspectives reviewed above, the concept of demands hold a ‘systemic’ effect. For Easton means, in essence, the reproduction of the existing order. For the authors of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* it may lead to the opening of an entirely new political logic. In the words of Laclau ‘it is in the nature of all demands to present claims to a certain established order, it is in a peculiar relation with that order, being both inside and outside it’.<sup>38</sup> The definition evokes the presence of an element of ‘excess’ embedded in what are called demands which, as a consequence, can never be fully translated into policies by Easton’s ‘black box’. In relation to the argument of this paper the examination of demands is relevant because i) they provide ‘the material’ or the actual content being enacted against the established order, and ii) it contributes to examine the nature of the social agents participating in the process of claiming or demanding. Put differently, the study of demands provides, at the lowest level of abstraction, ‘a point of assemblage’<sup>39</sup>, or the first indicators to identify the frontiers instituting a new emerging ‘we’.

#### **4. Case Selection**

Within the literature that engages with discourse analysis, there has been two important emphasis in the debate on the Latin American Left. First, to focus on the study on the smaller Andean nations such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela<sup>40</sup> and, second, to concentrate the attention onto the dynamics of the style of leadership predominant in elected presidents such as Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Hugo Chávez Frías in Venezuela.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the latter was justified since the three cases marked more evidently breaks with the past market-led form of governance, economic structuring and social mobilisation. Also because their elected presidents were considered ‘outsiders’, a novel attribute with regards to leadership. The cases of Argentina and Brazil, with larger economies and more complex system of stratification, present a fuzzier outlook. However, the case of Argentina was labelled ‘the less dissimilar’<sup>42</sup> to the three cases mentioned earlier and, Brazil, because of the colossal symbolism and charisma of Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva, has also been subject of scrutiny in the light of ‘the left turn’<sup>43</sup> or the ‘plural lefts’.<sup>44</sup>

There is, however, a more specific relevance that justifies the study of Argentina and Brazil in the context of this article. First, albeit with differences, both countries have experienced the establishment of post-neoliberal project of governance that, as it has been argued, retain elements of the previous export-led growth model whilst introducing new mechanisms for social inclusion and welfare.<sup>45</sup> Second and connected to the first point, it was in the urban cities of Argentina and Brazil in which a mass movement of discontent emerged with particular strength (and lasting implications) precisely in the context of post-neoliberalism.<sup>46</sup>

Post-neoliberalism is the concept used to express the way many countries in Latin America have attempted to articulate a new political economy of development that began in the 2000s. Beyond the dichotomy ‘more’ or ‘less’ state, Grugel and Riggirozzi<sup>47</sup> suggest, instead, that Post-neoliberalism imply ‘both the strengths and the weaknesses of the ways in which the state–market–society nexus is being re-imagined and recast’. For the authors, post-neoliberalism is built upon a set of political aspirations centred on reclaiming the authority of the state to oversee the construction of a new approach to welfare, on the one hand, and new economic policies that seek to enhance the state

capacity to ensure growth but also response to citizenship demands, on the other.<sup>48</sup> For Wylde<sup>49</sup> the nature of this political moment in Argentina under the Kirchners' government was based on a new social contract between the state and the people, less mediated by the traditional Peronist corporatist pact. These interpretations have contributed to understand the effects of the left turn in the region, and in Argentina and Brazil in particular, beyond simplistic characterisations like the one that opposed the emergence of 'the good' versus 'the bad' left.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas the literature cited above underscores the importance of 'moment of the state', post-neoliberalism as a socio-political process needs to be interpreted also in the light of 'the moment of society', that is, the mobilisation from below that preceded the institutional phase.<sup>51</sup> Argentina represented a paradigmatic case because of the radical application of neoliberal policies under a short period of time.<sup>52</sup> This led to profound transformations as a result of the establishment of new patterns of integration and exclusion<sup>53</sup> which, as pointed out before, altered significantly the institutional arrangements between organised labour (trade unions) and the state; the political arrangement that had cemented a weak but effective form of welfare in the country.<sup>54</sup> The rise of unemployment, poverty and marginality tore apart elemental forms of social cohesion and solidarity that, in turn, established what Svampa called '*una sociedad excluyente*' (an excluding society), a type of society structured upon economic, social and cultural inequalities.<sup>55</sup> Social mobilisations, however, mutated its form rather than vanished. The latter opened a new cycle of social resistance characterised by non-conventional forms of popular belligerence of which the events of December 2001 constituted an eloquent representation.<sup>56</sup> The repertoire of social protest included roadblocks, worker-led management of "recovered factories", town revolts (*puebladas*), pot banging, neighbourhood assemblies, barter clubs; and also more conventional forms such as marches and strikes.<sup>57</sup> As it was accurately observed by Svampa and Pereyra, the mobilisation during the second half of 1990s occurred between 'the road and the neighbourhood'<sup>58</sup>, representing a fundamental displacement in relation to the traditional spatial sphere of action of trade unions, i.e. the factory and the public square. For protesters and actors mobilising the anti-neoliberal discontent there was no disambiguation between the government and the state. Instead, the government was perceived as directly promoting

the establishment of a neoliberal state. The emergence of centre-left governments had a profound effect in the anti-neoliberal formation precisely because of how the new function of the government was perceived in relation to the struggle against the neoliberal state. But this new protest cycle was characterised by the presence of two fundamental elements that ultimately shaped the imaginaries of Post-neoliberalism in Argentina: a) the emergence of new organisational forms such as the UTDs (Unionised Unemployed Workers), the *Piqueteros*, the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (Argentinian Workers' Central), the *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* (The Classist and Combative Stream) the *Federación de Tierra Vivienda y Hábitat* (Federation for Land, Housing, and Environment), to name a few. They were organisations expressing different social groupings and claiming new forms of identifications, holding a high degree of autonomy from political parties, trade unions and the state. And b) although the protest during the 1990s tended to be extremely diverse, as expressed by the variety of new social organisations, they equally sustained one common discursive element, namely, the opposition to neoliberalism, expressed in the overarching notion of anti-neoliberalism.<sup>59</sup>

The 'moment of society' that preceded the formation of Post-neoliberalism in the case of Brazil shows differences but also important similarities which ultimately makes it comparable to the case of Argentina. Whereas in Argentina there was a clearer 'rupture' with regards to the type of organisations that expressed dissent during the 1990s, the case of Brazil shows stronger elements of continuity with the process of mobilisation opened in the context of the democratisation of the 1980s. Evidence of this is that the two major organisations protagonist of the process of mobilisation of dissent in the 1990s were the CUT (Unified Workers' Central) in the urban and the MST (Landless Rural Workers' Movement) in the rural, both of which were born in the late 1970s and who played a critical role in the political opening of Brazil, marked by the *Movimento das Diretas Já* (Movements for Direct Elections Now!).<sup>60</sup> Needless to say, Brazil, like Argentina, was also a laboratory of social resistance during the 1990s including innovations such as Participatory Budgeting<sup>61</sup> and the World Social Forum<sup>62</sup>, both in the Porto Alegre district governed by the Workers' Party, the political arm of the CUT. These were bottom-up spaces which were instrumental for the forces of the left to debate

alternative strategies, develop organisational capacity, and also elaborate a common discourse. The student movement played a decisive role in 1992 leading a successful campaign to impeach President Collor de Mello; accused of widespread corruption and who was subsequently ousted later the same year.<sup>63</sup> The heterogeneity of movements and their influence in the reconstruction of 'participatory publics'<sup>64</sup> in Brazil was well captured by the influential book of Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar<sup>65</sup> in the argument that 'popular movements, along with feminist, Afro-Latin American, lesbian and gay, and environmental movements, have been instrumental in constructing a new conception of democratic citizenship'. Like in the case of Argentina, increasing flexibility of employment, deregulation, outsourcing, new ways of managing labour, and the leaders' own agenda to make themselves 'credible' to the electorate, affected the ability of the CUT to articulate by its own a powerful force against market-led reforms.<sup>66</sup> However, the declining gravitation of the CUT at the workplace and in the public sphere in the late 1990s was occupied by the increasing presence of the MST in the countryside *and* in the city. The Homeless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto*), arguably the urban branch of the rural MST, appeared with strength in the 1990s at the base level and to an extent took over the resistance at the societal sphere that the CUT left vacant because it was already targeting institutional gains.<sup>67</sup> Despite the substantial differences across the multitude of societal organisations mobilising social protest in Brazil in the 1990s, there was one strong similarity with Argentina, found in the opposition to neoliberalism as their common denominator to aggregate an ever increasing number of suppressed demand. The anti-neoliberalism underlying social resistance in the late 1990s in Brazil and Argentina represented the most important 'empty signifier'<sup>68</sup> permeating the formation of new social imaginaries, reconstructing a bottom-up left-leaning counterdiscourse, which redefined the political and ideological centre that challenged the liberal setting of politics<sup>69</sup>, and that ultimately configured the political identity of the Post-neoliberal subject.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, the integration of popular sectors to the 'Post-neoliberal governance' in Brazil and Argentina was marked the activation of a pluralistic set of social subjects, who functioned under a more decentralised organisational structure but also forge new organisational forms as means of expressing

their social identities. The latter challenged, for example, simplistic associations between the popular sectors and patronage relationships.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the *names* of organisations were important to establish, on the one hand, their ideological difference with other organisations and, on the other, to differentiate themselves from *the* Other (namely, neoliberalism). Also, the political subject underpinning the institution of the Post-neoliberal formation identified neoliberalism as its common discursive enemy. As a consequence, anti-neoliberalism functioned as the shared signifier articulating a set of heterogeneous (and often competing) societal narratives. The lesson from the brief review of this process is that social protest in the 1990s mattered for the cases of Argentina and Brazil because it shaped the imaginaries underpinning the counterdiscourse that defined Post-neoliberal governance.

Therefore, the question that remains is the following. If the ‘move to the left’ in the 2000s in Argentina and Brazil was the result of a longer process of contentious mobilisation from below enacted primarily during the latter part of the previous decade, what sort of social imaginaries have been enacted in the newest wave of discontent and what is its likely effect on the Post-neoliberal form of governance?

The argument put forward here is that the newest wave of social protest elicits the re-enactment of the liberal imaginary indirectly expressed under the notion of the *republic*. This operation tends to undermine the bases of post-neoliberalism, i.e. ‘the popular’, ‘the national-popular’ and ‘anti-neoliberalism, the imaginaries that defined the move to the left in the region. In other words, there is an expansion and increasing complexity of the social whole, what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>72</sup> called the ‘moment of difference’. The prevalence of the latter (at the expense of the logic of equivalence, the simplification of the social whole) means that this process of mobilisation remains, for now, at the societal level with limited vertical penetration upon the sphere of government and political institutions. There is a new activated public, associated to middle class sectors, that raises new demands and do not identify with the “anti-neoliberal” camp. In as much as this activation means a dispute over the *name of the people*, it signals a slowdown in the efficacy of existing populist formation to deepen the movement towards more radical reforms.

**Figure 1**

The argument outlined above sustains the presence of two key dimensions permeating the construction and deconstruction of social imaginaries, namely, the organisational (X-Axis) and the rhetorical (Y-Axis). Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic of each dimension in relation to the formation of imaginaries. In a nutshell, the Post-neoliberal imaginaries are the result of strong identifications with a variety of collective social organisations, such as old and new social movement organisations (the CTA, *piqueteros*, CUT, MST, etc.) and also a strong anti-neoliberal sentiment. On the contrary, the emerging social imaginaries at play in the newest wave of social protest suggest a weaker identification with collective social organisations and also the weaker presence of anti-neoliberal sentiments. It should also be noticed that the proposed analytical matrix sustains an implicit dimension of time because it puts in relation the mobilisation of the late 1990s with the mobilisation of the late 2000s. **If anti-neoliberalism reinstituted the national-popular imaginary and in turn the post-neoliberal order, what sort of new consensus is bringing about the mobilisation of new imaginaries by the newest wave of social protest in the context of 'post-neoliberalism'?**

Following a qualitative research strategy, in the next two sections the aim is to examine each dimension in the light of the newest wave of social protest. As discussed in the first section, we work at the level of representations seeking to identify '*concrete systems of social relations and practices that are intrinsically political, as their formation is an act of radical institution which involves the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between "insiders" and "outsiders"'*'.<sup>73</sup> This framework allows us to be sensitive both to the historically specific experience of Argentina and Brazil as well as to the universal forces that determine identification processes and identity formation.

#### **4. The Organisational Dimension**

In June 2013, Brazil was shaken by the largest mass protest movement the country has experienced for a generation. On June 6 a demonstration was called against an increase in the bus fare by the Free Pass Movement (MPL), an organisation founded in 2005 in the context of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. The MPL's founding motto is 'For a life without turnstiles' (*Por uma vida sem catracas*)<sup>74</sup> in reference to their main struggle, that is, free public transport for all away from private control. They characterise themselves as 'autonomous, nonpartisan, horizontal and independent'<sup>75</sup>. This is an organisation with presence in many of Brazil's biggest cities and who define their struggle as the effective democratisation of the urban space. The demonstration of June 6<sup>th</sup> was brutally repressed by the police, and the protest spiralled like wildfire over the coming days in every major and middle-size Brazilian city as well as within Brazilian's living abroad.<sup>76</sup> A small contained event of two thousand protesters was transformed into a mass mobilisation of hundreds of thousands in which new organisational forms gained centre stage, displacing to a great extent the MPL to the margins of it all. Since then, the 'ownership' of the mobilisation began to be a heavily disputed territory to the extent that participants holding party political identifications (such as PT, PSTU, PSOL e PCO) were at some point expelled by the dominant presence of 'nonpartisan' groups.<sup>77</sup> Three of the most significant organisations that emerged in this process and are important to mention here are the following: 'Brazil Free Movement' (*Movimiento Brasil Livre*, MBL), 'Come to the Road' (*Vem Pra Rua*, VPR) and 'Angry Online' (*Revoltados On-line*, ROL). With the latter being the most popular, the three Facebook pages combined have received more than a million and a half 'likes' (1.676.000). The number is significant if we consider that the PT's official Facebook page managed to collect only 12 thousand likes. ROL is the 'oldest' of the three founded in 2010. It states in its mission that 'it is an organisation of popular initiative to combat corrupts in power'<sup>78</sup> with the word corruption having the letter P and the T in upper cases (*corruPTos*) in clear reference to the Workers' Party.<sup>79</sup> The mission of VPR is similar in relation to the expression of a general sense of outrage but also clearer in terms of its ideological content: 'Come to the road to demonstrate your outrage with us. Our flag is democracy, ethics in politics, and a slimmer state'.<sup>80</sup> It underscores the importance of demonstrating against the lack-of-ethics and corrupt government and politicians. The objective, they add, is 'to recuperate hope which has been highjack by corruption, to demand more efficiency and



*transparency in public spending and to defend the reduction of the tax burden and bureaucracy. We dream with a Brazil in which every citizen can live with dignity of their work and be active in building a prosperous society*'.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, the MBL emphasises its non-partisanship status who struggle for a country free from state oppression and corruption.<sup>82</sup> Aesthetically, the three of them look authentic grassroots endeavours. They all make an exuberant display of the Brazilian national flag, in-line with the strong enactment of national symbols at demonstrations, such as singing the national anthem. Moreover, extracts from the national anthem lyrics like 'You will see that your son does not run away from a fight' (*verás que um filho teu não foge à luta*) were frequently used by these organisations to promote the calls for mobilisation on social media. However, the bottom-up rebellion through social media was eloquently seconded by the strong support of the mass media. Finally, it is important to mention the anarchist group the Black Block.<sup>83</sup> Their members usually occupied the demonstrations' frontline against the police and, as a consequence, gained greater notoriety for the local and international press. Essentially internationalists, the Black Block was rejected across the rest of the organisational spectrum, and their lasting influence beyond the demonstrations themselves has been limited.

In the case of Argentina, the organisational composition of the newest type of social protest presents both similarities and differences. In terms of difference, the organisations behind the initial moment of eruption of discontent in March 2008, the four major agricultural producers' associations, represent old organisations historically associated with the right-wing; rather than a new type of organisations associated with the left, such as the case of MPL in Brazil. Similarly to the Brazilian case, as the protest wave developed over time, other more 'anonymous' social grouping gained centre stage, aiming to hollow the demonstrations from any form of partisanship form of identification. A few months after Cristina Kirchner was elected president with more than 45 per cent of the votes, her government introduced legislation (the bill 125) to increase the regulation of the agricultural sector in an attempt to contain the rise of domestic prices. These were being affected by the global commodity boom, especially of cereals like soya bean.<sup>84</sup> Small farmers gathered in the Argentinian Agrarian Federation (FAA) as well as big landowners associated in the powerful Argentinian Rural Society

(SRA) and two more (CRA and CONINAGRO), coordinated for the first time their actions by setting up the Mesa de Enlace ('linking table'). With the agricultural sector united, they launched a national strike. They initially planned to halt the commercialisation of grains for 48 hours but this ended up lasting four months.<sup>85</sup> The protest actions included roadblocks that affected the distribution of dairy products creating shortages (and price hikes) in some major Argentinian cities.<sup>86</sup> The events of the 'rural protest' polarised the nation between the K (government supporters) and the Anti-K (against the government) camp. Cristina Kirchner identified the action of protesters as 'pickets of abundance', contrasting the 'pickets of misery and poverty' experienced in Argentina during the 2001/2 crisis.<sup>87</sup> Alfredo de Angeli, one of the most outspoken protesters, replied: 'When Mrs President says that she redistributes wealth, to who is it redistributed?...to the corporations...to be cheered in her public meetings, that is not the Argentina we want'.<sup>88</sup> The bill was sent to Congress where it was finally defeated by Cristina's own Vice-president who, famously, voted a 'no positive' tiebreaker in the Senate. The government managed to weathered the depth of the crisis showing initiatives on other policy fronts, but the event had already opened a long-lasting socio-political cleavage.

November 8 2012, marked the appearance of new organisational forms mobilising the anti-K sentiment which had been initially articulated by the farmers' associations.<sup>89</sup> Thousands gathered in the evening in most cities of Argentina in what it was one of the largest mobilisations since 2001. Unlike the farmers' protest, there was no clear 'organiser' as the event adopted an explicit nonpartisan tone but strongly anti-government. Three social media platforms are important to mention: '*El Anti K*', '*Yo No la vote a la Kretina, y usted?*' and '*El Cipayo*'. Their Facebook pages, put together, have collected 302 thousand likes at the time of the writing of this article. Although it is not yet clear who actually made the first call to mobilise on the 8N, the mentioned platforms (which include blogs, twitter accounts, YouTube and live streaming channels) have been active promoters of this and other subsequent events, in turn establishing themselves as reference point for demonstrators. *El Anti-K* states on its Facebook page a minimalist definition of its mission, that is, a 'group entirely against the ideas of the government [and] the political movement called Frente Para la Victoria, Kirchnerismo or its equivalences'.<sup>90</sup> It follows a quote from Nelson Mandela about rights, literacy and democracy and

an additional comment by Marcelo Moran and Mariana Torres (the Facebook page's administrators) which says 'We have the right not to agree with you, Mrs President...if you, with taxpayers' money...hold patronage policies and use OUR money with partisan ends, WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO RIGHT TO SPEECH...!'.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, *El Cipayo*, which name has a place in Argentina's political culture, as for Peronist folklore means the local who supports the policies of the Empire, outlines a more conceptual and short description of themselves: 'We believe in institutions, respect the rights of fellow citizens, and love freedom in all its forms. For many that is to be #Cipayos'.<sup>92</sup> It also adds: 'We wish this can become a means of expression, in which we can say what needs to be said to recuperate our Republic...welcome to the revolution of common sense'.<sup>93</sup> Finally, as the name reveals *Yo No la vote a la Kretina, y usted?* ('I did not vote to the cretin, and you?' with the noun misspelled with the letter K) says 'United we can. In 2015 let's save the Republic'.<sup>94</sup> Apart from the role of social media, like in Brazil, the mass media openly promoted these mobilisations. The relationship between the mass media, especially between the Clarín Group, and the government deteriorated after the government passed antitrust legislation in 2009 that affected their commercial interests.<sup>95</sup> Unlike the 'Que se vayan todos' ('We want them all out'), which characterised the mass mobilisations of 2001<sup>96</sup>, the organisations behind the newest type of protests in Argentina seem to redefine this collective outcry to 'we want *them* out'. Also unlike the protest of the 1990s, marked by a plurality of organisations on the street fighting to dominate the public sphere, there are no names of organisations on banners and placards because the new organisations explicitly avoid any formal link with political parties or other traditional civil society institution.<sup>97</sup> They claim to be Argentinian, without divisions. But in order to find out more about the imaginaries under construction by these new organisational forces, we need to examine the content of demands being enacted by them. That is the objective of the next section.

## 5. The Rhetorical Dimension

Unlike previous mobilisations which were focused around demands for direct presidential elections (democratisation campaign of 1980s) and the ousting of the president (impeachment of Collor de Mello in early 1990s), the 2013 protests in Brazil expressed a wide range of (often conflicting)

demands<sup>98</sup>. These included fairer public transport fares, broader social policy issues such as improvement in public health, education and, finally, corruption. There has also been a significant change in the content of demands since the movement started in June 2013. In short, it has been a tale of three movements. The initial trigger was a negative formulation of demands associated with the action of rejection of the increase in bus fares. This first movement was followed by a quantitative multiplication of participants in demonstrations, from a couple of thousands to hundreds of thousands, the broadening of demands beyond the bus fare, including the general improvement in public transport and public services, such as health and education, which ultimately change the dominant sign of demands from negative to positive. There were more varied banners by June 17 expressing concerns about rising prices, poor schools and hospitals and the cost of the following year's football World Cup. 'First-world stadiums, third-world schools and hospitals', said one placard.<sup>99</sup> Although demands were not clearly articulated in the form of a political project, this moment represented the most purposeful of the newest protest in Brazil. The third movement expressed a new shift in the dominant content of demands as well as in the prevailing sign which shifted again from positive back to negative. Barely five months after Dilma was re-elected, between 10 and 20 thousand marched along the seafront at Copacabana, singing the national anthem, waving flags and chanting 'Dilma out' ('Fora a Dilma').<sup>100</sup> This was a protest against corruption in the light of the massive Petrobras scandal (so-called '*Petrolão*')<sup>101</sup>, but also a demand for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. Some protesters also expressed their wish for the return of the military. In one of the most recent mobilisations, on April 12 2015 at Av. Paulista in the city of São Paulo, the testimony of a white middle-aged man sums up the mood of the protesters:

*-“I am here at this demonstration, democratic, of the Brazilian people, of the paulistano people, so that the people can win over the Republican Brazil, free of corruption, with freedom and with social progress. That is why I'm here today.*

*-Do you demand the impeachment of the President?*

*-I think that the President does not have political consensus to govern. She is actually not governing. She must answer to Brazil...She is not in conditions to carry on governing Brazil".*<sup>102</sup>

The latter emphasis on the ‘moral degradation’, ‘corruption’ and the need for the return of ‘ethics to politics’ has also been apparent in the newest wave of demonstrations in neighbouring Argentina. The very specific demand put forward by the farmers’ Mesa de Enlace in 2008, that is, the withdrawal of the bill 125 and, beyond that, the elimination of all form of levy to agricultural exports, over the coming years, gained a more general remit. The biggest mobilisations following the ‘rural protest’ took place between 2012 and 2013.<sup>103</sup> Some of the slogans of the 8N were ‘security’, to ‘stop corruption’, ‘No to the Constitutional reform, ‘against income tax’, ‘inflation’, ‘for an independent Justice System’, ‘against restrictions to buy US\$’, ‘free Press’, ‘freedom’.<sup>104</sup> There were also abusive language against the figure of Cristina Kirchner and government ministers. Politicians of the opposition participated of the demonstrations although not in the name of the party and without having visible forms of partisanship identification.<sup>105</sup> Although less well attended, there was another important demonstration on November 13 2014 (the ‘13N’) in which people banged their pots, came out to the streets and reiterate their sense of discontent.<sup>106</sup> This time the demands focused on ‘institutions’ and the ‘republic’. When marchers arrived at the Plaza de Mayo (in the centre of Buenos Aires, opposite the Government House), the national anthem was sang three times, then everyone applauded and cheered ‘Viva la patria!’ (‘Long live the homeland!’). Unlike previous mobilisations, politicians of the oppositions were no longer welcome. An interviewee at the demonstration stated: ‘When we say that everyone is being targeted, it is because everyone is in the spotlight, we do not have a political preference nor do we campaign for a politician...just now the *Momo* Vanegas passed by and was insulted like Cristina is. If Macri [Buenos Aires’ Mayor] comes, he will be insulted too’.<sup>107</sup>

## **6. Final Remarks**

In terms of the organisational component of the newest type of protest, the evidence in both cases illustrates the increasing presence of online platforms different from the social movements and trade unions that dominated the social protest in the 1990s. These platform are devoted to organise mobilisations setting the date and the type of protest action. They show weak internal deliberative spaces as their missions and objectives do not discuss the groups' strategies in relation to a broader political program. Regardless of the actual name of these platforms, one of their key objective is secure 'anonymous' participation in protest action. People are requested to attend the events as individual citizens and not as part of 'groups'. In terms of the demands the most evident shift in relation to the 1990s is the absence of the signifier (anti)neoliberalism. The main grievances have been associated to 'corruption', 'institutions' and the 'republic'.

How does the idea of the republic enacted by protesters relate to their emerging discourse? According to Bobbio and Viroli<sup>108</sup> the emancipatory potential of the classical political ideal of the republic is that the political order is based on the principle of the common good. This ideal is different from left and right wing ideologies for which the institutional mediation of the state oppresses either the free movement of the market forces or the emancipatory potential of the working class. They add that the republic is the guarantee of 'emancipation from dependency on the arbitrary will of other individuals'<sup>109</sup>. Populism is seen by republican political theory as the result of the action of demagogues who go against the wider political principle (the common good) in favour of just part of the people (or a particular good), who are, in turn, object of manipulation. Republicanism perceives laws and institutions as freedom's most necessary foundation. Protesters' political imaginary resonates with the ideals of the republican political theory in terms of i) the references to the individual rather than to collective bodies; ii) the references to institutions rather than charismatic leaders; and ii) the reference to one nation rather than to conflictive and competing peoples. But it would be misleading to close the analysis with this simplistic association. There is a new political discourse in the making. Unlike the republican political theory approach, this paper suggests that discourses institute peoples who, in turn, reproduce or challenge given hegemonic formations. These processes occur within and beyond the institutional apparatus, which is understood as the

crystallisation of relation of forces rather than neutral channels of communications between the civil vis-à-vis the political society. As a consequence, it can be argued that the emergent political imaginaries suggest a departure from the post-neoliberal consensus. However, their ultimate formulation into a new political discourse, far from embodying the republican ideal, will be shaped by future 'chain of equivalences' which will define its inclusionary and, more importantly, exclusionary frontiers. It is yet unclear its ultimate formulation but what is clear is that the republican ideals constitute new politically contentious empty signifiers rather than a clear political strategy. Commentators have been assessing the meaning of the recent mobilisations. The protests in Argentina were seen as the result of 'dashed hope' because 'governments are failing their people in many ways'.<sup>110</sup> Diaz Echenique et al saw it in a different way as they perceived that the mobilisations expressed 'the new Argentine right'<sup>111</sup> discontent with progressive government reforms. In turn, the mobilisations in Brazil for Zibechi, for instance, are 'part of a process of anti-capitalist struggle that have brewed for decades'<sup>112</sup>, very different from the view of Tatagiba et al who observe these mobilisations as 'protests of the right'<sup>113</sup> who worry about corruption but not equality.

The conclusions of this paper differ from the 'dashed hoped' hypothesis and also from the direct association of these protests with the political right in the region. First, these protests reveal the slowdown in efficacy of the imaginary 'anti-neoliberalism' which is at the societal bone of the 'left turn' and the establishment of Post-neoliberal form of governance. Neither new demands nor new organisational forces define themselves in relation to this signifier any more. Second, it is apparent the emergence of new social imaginaries opposing the anti-neoliberalism, based on primarily 'individual citizenship' as prime societal form of organisation and 'institutions' and 'the republic' as their main demands. 'Corruption', 'institutions', and the 'republic' are not essentially claims of the right because they have also been demands of the left in the struggles for political democratisation in the 1980s as well as in the mobilisations of the 1990s. They became demands of the progressive movements because they were articulated by the anti-neoliberal imaginary, which in turn redefined them and gave them a unified political content and direction. With the slowdown in efficacy of the latter, these demands reappear and it is, as a consequence, understandable their associations with the right-wing

movement. However, this is too conclusive. Instead, and this is the third and final reflection, they reveal a moment of expansion and increasing complexity of the social whole, what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe<sup>114</sup> called the 'moment of difference'. The social was 'simplified' by the 'neoliberal' versus 'anti-neoliberal' imaginaries and the mobilisations are bringing a new complexity to this dichotomy. Thus, new agents (middle class, urban, etc.) are being formed but they yet lack the equivalential moment that would (re)simplify their struggles and can provide the movement with the verticality to penetrate political institutions. There are new demands and an incipient liberal social imaginary which has not yet been constructed as a 'horizon' that can offer a consistent counter-narrative to Post-neoliberalism. This is the moment to be creative and carry on struggling for decision-making roles rather than to retrieve to the 'comfortable' space of resistance. In as much as this activation means an ongoing dispute over the *name of the people*, as to who is the subject of the dominant political order, it is up to the progressive forces of Latin America to reclaim the meaning of dangerous words.

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<sup>2</sup> Infobae, "#8n: Masivo "Cacerolazo" Contra El Gobierno Argentino En Todo El País," Available at: <http://www.infobae.com/2012/11/09/1061140-8n-masivo-cacerolazo-contra-el-gobierno-argentino-todo-el-pais> [Accessed 9.07.15] (9.11.2012).

<sup>3</sup> Luciana Tatagiba, Thiago Trindade, and Ana Claudia Chaves Teixeira, ""Corruptos": Um Ensaio Sobre Protestos À Direita No Brasil (2007-2015)" *Núcleo de Pesquisa em Participação, Movimentos Sociais e Ação Coletiva* (Nepac- Unicamp) (2015): 5

<sup>4</sup> Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Mass Protests under 'Left Neoliberalism': Brazil, June-July 2013," *Critical Sociology* 39, no. 5 (2013): 227

<sup>5</sup> Jason Glynos and David R. Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London ; New York: Routledge 2007); Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of Syriza," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2 (2014); Francisco Panizza, ed. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005); David Howarth, *Discourse* (USA, UK: Open University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *Discourse*.op. cit., Ref. 5: 1-2

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: 3

<sup>8</sup> McAdam et al 1996: 6 in *ibid.*: 3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 4

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: 4

<sup>11</sup> Lipset 1960, Rostow 1960 in Francisco Panizza, "Beyond 'Delegative Democracy': 'Old Politics' and 'New Economics' in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32, no. 3 (2000): 737



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- <sup>12</sup> Juan Pablo Ferrero, *Democracy against Neoliberalism in Argentina and Brazil: A Move to the Left* (Basingstoke, U. K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).: see the distinction between 'the first' and 'the second' O'Donnell in Chapter 1; Panizza, "Beyond 'Delegative Democracy': 'Old Politics' and 'New Economics' in Latin America.": 738
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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.: 59-60
- <sup>15</sup> Enrique Peruzzotti, "The Nature of the New Argentine Democracy: The Delegative Democracy Argument Revisited," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33, no. 1 (2001); Leonardo Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002)., *Democracy Against Neoliberalism* op. cit., Ref 12.
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- <sup>17</sup> "Democracy and the Question of Power.", op. cit., Ref 16.
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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 5
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- <sup>24</sup> David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis " in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, ed. David Howarth, Aletta Norval, J., and Yannis Stavrakakis (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 2000).: 2-3
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- <sup>28</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, "Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis ": 15
- <sup>29</sup> *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
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- <sup>32</sup> "The Sociological Reformulation of Laclau's Social Imaginaries ", op. cit. Ref. 26.
- <sup>33</sup> "Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis ", op. cit, Ref. 24: 15-16
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- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.: 158
- <sup>36</sup> *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (New York: Knopf, 1953).
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